

What Chicago Achieved



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In statistical data analysis as in everyday experience, first impressions can be deceiving. A superficial glance at the Chicago murder rate in the years following implementation of its handgun ban indicates that homicide counts increased sharply through the late 1980s and into the early 1990s — a fact noted by those challenging the efficacy (as well as constitutionality) of the ban.

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The premature conclusion was that law-abiding Chicagoans were being deprived of their right and ability to protect themselves from armed criminals, who easily obtained guns through illegal channels.

However, a closer examination of the crime trends shows that the surge in homicides largely involved criminals targeted by other criminals, reflecting the crack-related gang wars that had exploded in Chicago as in cities across America. By contrast, homicides occurring in residential settings declined, especially those involving family members as perpetrators.

While Chicago residents, particularly those living in high crime neighborhoods, might feel the need to protect themselves with guns, the fact is, guns purchased and kept in the bedside drawer for defensive purposes are all too often used instead to settle a domestic dispute. The Chicago handgun ban directly addresses this peril of private handgun ownership.

In preparing an amicus brief in support of the handgun ban, I analyzed detailed homicide data for Chicago and dozens of other American cities, adjusted not only for population size but also for each municipality's demographic and socio-economic profile.

My analysis of the Chicago data found that, compared with other cities, the handgun ban had lowered the rate of gun homicide. In fact, over the past 25 years, there were an estimated 800 to 1,000 fewer murders in Chicago because of the handgun ban.

Whatever the outcome of the ongoing legal challenge, the public debate over whether gun ownership increases or decreases the risk of violence may never be settled. In the meantime, let's hope Chicago will be permitted to maintain its ban on handgun ownership, saving dozens of lives annually for many years to come.